ABSTRACT ON:

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SITA DEVI AND SHANTA DEVI IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF KALYANI FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION

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2016
Introduction

Sita Devi (1895-1988) and Shanta Devi (1894-1988) are daughters of Sri Ramananda Chatterjee (1865-1943), the well-known publicist, who edited “Prabasi”, a Bengali monthly, and “The Modern Review”, an English one. Both are very influential, the latter being the most widely read of all Indian monthlies.

This influence has come to him after a long struggle, in which he has shown uncompromising independence. Sprung from a family of Sanskrit professors and priests, his own generation, his cousins and brothers, first broke through their tradition of aloofness, and learned English. Sri Ramananda Chatterjee himself discarded the thread more than thirty years ago, when he joined the Brahma Samaj. For many years he was a College professor, first in Calcutta, then in Allahabad. But he was restive under the educational system of Indian universities and his relations with governing bodies were often strained. He has continued to have strained relations with all governing bodies. Calcutta University has found in him a sleepless critic, who has been largely responsible for the public's loss of confidence in that learned body. Nor can Government have faced any more watchful foe. Without any of the elaborate machinery for collecting news which our great Western journals have at their disposal, he has managed, year after year, to gather in, month by month, often from the most inaccessible sources, items which have served him in his warfare. One never knows what is going to find its way next into the pages of The Modern Review. Yet he cannot be dismissed as an extremist. He has the cross-bench type of mind; and ascendency today in India should win their aims, it is hard to see how they could use Ramananda Chatterjee. But whether they used him or not, he would remain a force to be reckoned with the most resourceful, the most unresting of critics. Englishmen must have often found him bitter and unfair, but English scholars like E. J. Thompson for one have been
compelled, sometimes almost against his will, to recognise his courage and his steadfast principle. He has repeatedly stood against a popular clamour from his own countrymen as stiffly as against any Government action, refusing to bow to the storm.

So, Sri Chatterjee, the father of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi whole life has been one of battle and political journalism. Yet the reader of his daughters' stories will be struck by the way they avoid politics. The centre of interest has shifted inward, to Hindu social life. This change of interest is a natural development from the father's effort, and completes it. Sri Ramananda Chatterjee or popularly known as Ramananda Babu is one of those Indians who cherish the name of Rammohan Ray, and, amid the insolent abuse recently flung at that name, as standing for the introduction of a denationalising foreign influence, he has proclaimed its outstanding greatness. Like Rammohan Ray, he has especially made the cause of women his own, and has never let pass any reasonable opportunity of protest against wrongs inflicted by society. No man living has a more flaming anger at cruelty than Ramananda Chatterjee. The negro-burning in Georgia during that time and the latest instance of a child-wife in Bengal committing suicide appear in his magazines, no less than the treatment of Indians in East Africa or Fiji, and go out into the bazaars and homes of all India.

He carried his convictions into action in his own family. His daughters were educated at home in the usual subjects, including English, and then sent to Bethune College, if the political party that is in the Calcutta. From the earliest days their father gave them the fullest intellectual freedom, never seeking to censor their reading. Both passed the B. A. with great credit, at Calcutta University. In 1912, while still students, they published a volume of stories translated from English, which were immediately popular. They introduced “Brer Rabbit” to Bengali nurseries. They trained themselves by study and translation of George Elliot's work, and of a few
stories from the French; they kept in close touch with their own land and its life. Their literary careers have advanced together. In 1917, Sita Devi's first original short story “Light of the Eyes” appeared in Prabasi, her sister's first one Sunanda appearing in the same magazine a month later.

In 1918, they wrote in collaboration a novel, “Udyamlata” (The Garden Creeper) in English, a serial for Prabasi. This was given over a column in the “Times Literary Supplement”, from the pen of the late Mr. J. D. Anderson, who knew Bengali literature as no other European did. He speaks of the books keen observation, sometimes girlishly amused, sometimes tenderly pitying, never harsh or bitter, which was rendered in a style which is in itself a delight to any competent student of Indian letters. They had excellent material, as he points out, in the contrast afforded between 'the varied life of the great cosmopolitan city of Calcutta, and also of the pleasant old-world existence led by rustic dwellers in the teeming villages of rural Bengal.'

The same writer gave equal praise to Sita Devi's “Cage of Gold”, which appeared first as a Prabasi serial in 1919. It was followed by Santa Devi's serial, “The Eternal” in 1920. It is interesting to observe that though they encouraged the education for women, yet they did not suggest that women should compete against men or neglect their domestic duties and responsibilities. All young women characters in Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s work were proficient in household management and at the same time excellent in education. It is mentionworthy that Santa Devi was also a versatile painter and specialized painting in water colours. She was a disciple of the well-known artists, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Sita Devi has published in “The Modern Review” translations by herself of her own and her sister's stories.

The two sisters thus present a wide culture, and their writings proceed from lives of unfettered freedom of thought. Other circumstances have helped to give them their detached
view of Hindu society. Though born in Calcutta, they lived in Allahabad from 1895 to 1908, and most of their dearest memories cluster about that place. They have also lived for a considerable period at Shantiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's 'Home of Peace', a place where thought is as liberal as the wide spaces that surround it. Here they found their fullest powers of expression, as nowhere else.

The readers of their stories will be in a position to understand something of the experience which lies behind these stories. He may be left to make his own comparisons, to see the resemblances and differences in their respective contributions. Bengali opinion discriminates between them by finding in Sita Devi's stories a touch of playful malice.

Shanta Devi's often show a delightful humour, with lifelike pictures of manners and persons. Both may be expected to improve greatly in technique, as they are still at the beginning of their careers. To the foreign reader, perhaps the most interesting thing in their writings will be the intellectual and personal element their keen, scornful vision and the angry contempt which blazes out. We feel, too, that they are exceedingly stirred against things close to their daily lives.

Effective criticism of a society comes best from those who are members of it. Indian society has been portrayed in the writings of Bankim Chatterjee, of Rabindranath Tagore, of Sarat Chatterjee, and many others. But it is an immense gain to any nation that its society should be seen through the eyes of its own intellectual countrywomen; and Indian society, in its public aspects and activities, means Indian men. This fire of personality and personal feeling gives the sisters' work significance beyond itself, and will make it a matter of deep interest to watch the development and widening of their powers.
For the present, there is in their work the added interest of seeing Indian life as Indians themselves see it, and of noting how Indian society deals with the problems which are occupying society everywhere, the readjustment of the relations of different classes, and above all, the contribution of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi in the development of women’s education during that period. The present research problem analyses historically the contribution of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi in the development of women’s education in the 21st century. Before concentrating on the study the researcher has focussed upon the study of the education and changing status of Bengali women during the 20th century.

Though not directly through any movements but by their literary activities they showed their protest through their pen against the wrongs done to women in the Indian society during that time.

The first chapter focuses upon the background of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi and their contributions to the “Prabasi” and “The Modern Review” magazines published by their illustrious father Sri Ramananda Chatterjee. It also historically analyses the condition of women during the ancient period, medieval period, the socio-cultural conditions of Bengal of the past two decades as well as the contribution of Hindu College as well as Bethune College in spreading women education. Further it stresses upon the national movement and women education during that era. Finally the education of women after independence has been highlighted and realizing the exploited condition of women in general, efforts were made by Government of India in several directions. Several committee and commissions were setup time to time. The all recommendations were to improve the quality of life of women in general these were as follows:
1. University Education Commission (1948-49)


3. National Committee on Women Education (1958-59)


5. Bhaktavasalam Committee (1963)


The rationale of this study is to portray Sita Devi and Shanta Devi as a literary genius who had their own independent style of writing. Through their fiery writing they contributed immensely to the development of women’s education during that time and for the future also. Their writings portray the intellectual and personal element, their keen, scornful vision and the angry contempt which blazes out. During that time no independent thinking women writers were found who were not only literary genius and also not feminist. Sita Devi's stories has a touch of playful malice while Shanta Devi often show a delightful humour, with lifelike pictures of manners and persons. Their writings portray a sense of social preaching as well as educational development of women during that century and for the future centuries also.

The study aims to highlight and analysed historically how the two sisters, Sita and Shanta Devi attempted to create a different and strong place for themselves through their writings as
well as in their educational works which had a positive influence on the society till now. Effective criticism of a society comes best from those who are members of it. Indian society has been portrayed in the writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi who had their own way of independent thinking. The fire of personality and personal feeling gives Shanta Devi-Sita Devi's work significance beyond itself, and will make it a matter of deep interest to observe the development and widening of their powers.

In the second chapter, the review of literature highlights the concept of women’s emancipation, importance of educational development of women and socio-economic situation of women in society of India.

The third chapter stresses focuses upon the design of the study. Further it has been discussed that during the era of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi there were no such independent women writers in the literary world of Bengal like them who were very much independent in their own approach. They portrayed through their writings the different forms of women emancipation without any kind of feminist patriarchic view and without any prejudice to menfolk. But it is an immense gain to any nation that its society should be seen through the eyes of its own intellectual countrywomen and Indian society who analysed it with such a positive thought for the development of the Indian society. They wrote with definite purpose which no women writer of that era attempted to. They reflected the views of their time. Their emphasized on the issues like child marriage, dowry, women education, widowhood etc. Historical research approach has been chosen for the purpose of the present study. Historical research design involves synthesizing data from many different sources.
In the present study as “Sample” the following written works of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi have been chosen for analysis:

- Shanta Devi: “Loyalty”; “The Ugly Bride”; “The Cake Festival”
- Sita Devi: “The Letter”; “The Broken Lily”; “Above All”

The joint work of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi titled:

“Uddyanlata” (The Garden Creeper) is also taken as sample.

The fourth chapter highlights the influence of Sri Ramananda Chatterjee and Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore in their written works and some of their characters in their novels and short stories. The literary and the educational development of Sita Devi as well as Shanta Devi would not have been possible during that time, if the minds have been filled with modern and traditional thoughts and that was only possible due to the influence of certain persons in their lives. To mention the first and foremost among them is their father, Sri Ramananda Chatterjee. It has been observed in the joint work of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi “The Garden Creeper” (“Uddyanlata” in Bengali) the character of “Shibeshwar”, the father of the protagonist “Mukti” a striking resemblance to Sri Ramananda Chatterjee.

Ramananda Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore shared were great friends. So, in every occasion be it programmes in Santiniketan or in the Calcutta mansion of Rabindranath Tagore both the sisters were very much present. Santa Devi participated even in the felicitation ceremony in Calcutta after he became a noble laureate. So, it is evident that they had a strong influence of Rabindranath Tagore and his writings like “Choker Bali”, “Haimanti” etc and such influences can be sought from Sita Devi and Shanta Devi’s stories like “The Ugly Bride”, “The Letter” etc.
It must be mentioned that the stories of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi depicted the following:

- The struggle of women in the male-dominated conservative society
- The struggle of educated young women for equality and freedom
- The plight of widows in the family and their exploitation
- Dowry system

In their work the added interest of seeing Indian societal life during the 19th and the 20th century is witnessed. As Indians themselves see it and of noting how Indian society deals with the problems which are occupying society everywhere, the readjustment of the relations of different classes and above all the readjustment of the relations in which the sexes stand to other other. The two writers Santa and Sita Devi has truly tried to bring about the development and synthesis of both the sexes in a true manner.

The fifth chapter discusses the contributions of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi in the development of women emancipation through education. It is witnessed from both of their novels that Shanta Devi and Sita Devi had immense influence of the Bethune College. Infact many of their short stories has reflections of their college life. That is why Shanta Devi and Sita Devi, jointly wrote a novel “Uddyanlata”(The Garden Creeper) where one gets a glimpse of their college life in various instances. Other than that the novel “Rajanigandha” too in Bengali, “Alojkha” etc. and other works one can see various instances of their college life reflection. For instance in Shanta Devi’s story “Uddyanlata” the protagonist Mukti’s first day in school, her excitement seeing her classmates is one instance. In another instance found in her story
“Mayurpuccha” the description of the school building which is very much common to Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s educational institutions where they went to study. The two sisters followed the ideology of nationalism established by an educated westernized middle class. Secondly, Santa Devi and Sita Devi followed their own feminist agenda to change the society. Through their writings, the authors remind their readers that in twentieth-century Bengal the patriarchy maintained the traditionalism, but at the same time promoted modernity.

The sixth chapter focuses upon the “New woman” in the novels of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi. It also stresses upon the concept of “bhadramahila” in Bengal, accepting Borthwick’s definition of them as “the mothers, wives and daughters of the many school masters, lawyers, doctors and government servants who made up the English-educated professional Bengali middle class or bhadralok.” At this time, a more formal kind of education was becoming more and more accessible to the Bengali bhadramahila as the increased numbers of girls in secondary English schools and in colleges show.

Both Sita Devi and Shanta Devi treated education as one of the strongest means for the change and development of original potentialities, personalities and productive powers of men and women which according to them were the specific necessities for the emancipation of women from all the evils existed in the society. This strong influence is carried forward in the 21st century also. Here mention must be made of Ashoke Viswanathan’s Bengali feature film “Bhrasta Tara” made on the year 2015 and based on Sita Devi’s story “The Broken Lily”. Mention must be made of “Writer’s Workshop” which is based in Lake Gardens, Kolkata and has its inception from the lifetimes of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi and at present headed by Shanta Devi’s grandson Prof. Ananda Lal who is a Professor of English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata.
In the *final chapter*, an attempt has been made to summarise and discuss the main findings of the study, based on the conceptual framework that was developed and in light of the objectives that were specifically set up. An analysis of the selected writings in terms of how they represent a set of common themes across the 20th century as well as in the 21st century of women writers who propagated women education through their writing has also been presented. Sita Devi and Shanta Devi has believed in some ideologies and which has been reflected through their writings. Some of the their important ideals which has been carried forward in the 21st century has been highlighted below:

For the emancipation of the women there is the need of the provision of mass education in all parts of the society. Women are to be encouraged to avail the opportunities of education so as to help them to realise the values of their lives. Education is the most powerful means of social change. Thus for the change of the social position of the women provision of education for all should be made. Education helps to realise the value of life. Once the value of life is well realised the process of emancipation becomes very easier.

Self dependence is one of the strongest means to lead life in peace. To overcome the material problem of life women are to take active part in the process of production in an orderly manner. Without the satisfaction of the material needs men and women can not lead life peacefully. Therefore, for the emancipation of the women work opportunities for every women should be made available in an orderly manner. To lead life in a democratic way women are to be encouraged to take active part in the process of economic change in the society.
Society should always care for the dignity of life of all. There should not be any gender discrimination in the social setting. Social attitude towards the women should be very positive. Society should always care for the legitimate rights of all without any gender discrimination.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY**

- The present study only focuses on the translated writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi.
- All the original writings have not been consulted.
- Only short stories and novels have been used for the purpose of this study. Other genres such as autobiographies and memoirs have not been included.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

- A variety of genres could be used for studying the identity development in girls and women such as autobiographies, memoirs, plays and poetry.

- Although the present research unfolds the contribution of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi in the educational development of women in the 21st century a broad spectrum can be obtained from the study of the male writers propagating women education.

- A comparative study of identity development of both boys and girls can be undertaken through the literary writings from a human development perspective.

- A study of girls educational development programmes like “Mahila Samakhya Programme” and “Beti Bachao,Beti Padhao Yojana”

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References


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